

The Elephant Mosaic Panel of Huqoq

“Write on the Horn of a Bull”

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Over the past decade, excavations on the western slopes of the Lower Galilee overlooking the Sea of Galilee have revealed a Byzantine-era synagogue that once stood at the center of the ancient village of Huqoq. Jewish literature of that era and later provides evidence of Huqoq’s existence, the latest of which is attributed to Ishtori Haparchi, a fourteenth-century rabbi, as he writes of his visit to Huqoq: “And there we saw a synagogue with an ancient floor.”¹ In 2011, a joint excavation team led by Professor Jodi Magness from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with the assistance of Assistant Director Shua Kisilevitz of the Israel Antiquities Authority began excavating at the site,² revealing a spectacular mosaic floor dated to the fifth century.³ It is possible that this is the same

floor that caught Ishtori Haparchi’s attention.⁴ This paper deals with one panel from this floor, known as the Elephant Mosaic panel.

I posit that the panel represents a complex dialogue with several sources and suggest that the panel is a visual portrayal of a rabbinic midrash dealing with the struggle between the Seleucid Empire and the Hasmoneans. Deciphering the visual language of the mosaic indicates that the panel presents a unique conception of the Hasmoneans and their struggle as not merely following rabbinic values.

The mosaic spans the entire synagogue floor including the nave and the aisles flanking it. The structure measures 20 × 16.5 m, and the floor of the nave is

1 Ishtori Haparchi, *Sefer Kaftor va-Ferach*, ed. A. Y. Havatzelet and Y. Dobrovitzer, 3 vols. (Jerusalem, 1994), 2:63. Unless otherwise noted, translations are the author’s.

2 Kisilevitz finished her activity with the excavation team in 2019. Over the last hundred years, there have been few archaeological surveys at Huqoq; see Z. Ilan, *Synagogues in the Galilee and the Golan* (Jerusalem, 1987), 42.

3 On the excavation’s progress and its findings, see J. Magness, S. Kisilevitz, M. Grey, D. Mizzi, D. Schindler, M. Wells, K. Britt, R. Bousthan, S. O’Connell, E. Hubbard, J. George, J. Ramsay, E. Boaretto, and M. Chazan, “The Huqoq Excavation Project: 2014–2017 Interim Report,” *BASOR* 380 (2018): 61–131; J. Magness, S. Kisilevitz, M. Grey, D. Mizzi, J. Burney, K. Britt, and R. Bousthan, “Huqoq—2018,” *Hadashot Arkheologiyot* 131 (2019), http://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/Report_Detail_Eng.aspx?id=25653&mag_id=127; and J. Magness, S. Kisilevitz, D. Mizzi, J. Burney, K. Britt, and R. Bousthan,

“Huqoq—2019,” *Hadashot Arkheologiyot* 132 (2020), http://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/report_detail_eng.aspx?id=25880&mag_id=128. For a detailed iconographic interpretation of the north aisle, see K. Britt and R. Bousthan, “Scenes in Stone: Newly Discovered Mosaics from the North Aisle in the Huqoq Synagogue,” *Studies in Late Antiquity* 5.4 (2021): 509–79. The late David Amit was supposed to be part of the excavation team; however, he was unable to join due to an illness that led to his untimely death. He did manage to help read one of the inscriptions revealed at the site: see D. Amit, “Mosaic Inscription from a Synagogue at Horvat Huqoq,” *Bible History Daily*, 2 January 2013, <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-artifacts/inscriptions/mosaic-inscription-from-a-synagogue-at-horvat-huqoq/>. David Amit was a neighbor and friend. Regrettably, I did not have the opportunity to discuss this with him. This paper is dedicated to his memory.

4 Magness et al., “Huqoq—2019.”

20 cm lower than that of the aisles.⁵ Most of the mosaic, approximately 60 percent, is well-preserved and rich in scenes depicting biblical narratives.⁶ In the nave are representations of the construction of the Tower of Babel, the Ark of Noah, Jonah being swallowed by a fish, and the parting of the Red Sea, with the zodiac at the center. Unfortunately, since this part of the mosaic was damaged, it is impossible to know whether the center contained a depiction of the figure of the sun god as it was found in the Hammath Tiberias and Beit Alfa synagogues or only a depiction of the sun similar to that seen in the Sepphoris Synagogue.⁷ The floors of the colonnades contain depictions of Samson and the foxes, the table of showbread, the spies, and Yael and Deborah (Judges 4–5) as well as two scenes from the Book of Daniel—the three children and the four beasts, among other biblical narratives. The only scene lacking clear interpretative consensus is the Elephant Mosaic panel.

The Elephant Mosaic Panel: A General Description

Uncovered during the third and fourth excavation seasons, the Elephant Mosaic panel (Fig. 1) has drawn much international attention and become the subject of heated academic debates.⁸ Located at the east aisle adjacent to the synagogue's entryway,⁹ it measures 111.7 × 196.5 cm and is divided into three horizontal registers

of differing widths. The upper, westernmost register occupies some 50 percent of the panel's total space. The width of the second, middle register is approximately one-third of the first panel's width, and the third, lower, easternmost register is narrowest, some 17 percent of the overall width.

The upper register depicts two groups facing one another. The top right corner contains a phalanx of seven soldiers garbed in typical Hellenistic military insignia, wearing helmets and armed with spears (δόρυ) and round shields (ἀσπίς). Beneath the phalanx are two elephants armored in battle gear. Standing just to the right of the center of the register is the figure of the apparent leader of the group. Nearly twice the size of the soldiers, his height spans the width of the register. He is bearded, wearing the diadem (διάδημα) and purple cloak (χλαμύς) traditionally worn by Hellenistic kings.¹⁰ His left hand grasps the horn of a large bull standing slightly behind him and near the soldiers. Due to their distinctly Hellenistic attire, I will refer to this group as the Hellenistic group.

The left side of the register depicts seven youthful figures clothed in white tunics and mantles marked with a sign in the shape of the Greek letter H, each holding a sword, some unsheathed, others not. In the center, adjacent to and opposite the Greek leader, stands a white-haired, bearded figure, depicted, like his counterpart, as twice as large as the men he leads. His right arm is raised with his finger pointing upward. Despite the seeming lack of any distinct visual religious or ethnic identity in this group, I will refer to it as the Jewish group. This is supported simply by the fact that the mosaic was crafted for a Jewish synagogue. However, we shall see several other artistic elements that support this assertion.

The middle register depicts nine figures resembling those in the group to the left of the top register. Each is framed by one of nine arches crowned with a lit oil lamp. At the center, an elderly male, visibly a leader of the group, is seated on a throne and holding an object resembling a scroll.¹¹ Only the left half of the easternmost [lower] mosaic register has been preserved. At its center lies a bull resembling the one in the top register, prostrate on the ground with blood gushing from the gaping wounds caused by three javelins piercing its belly. To its left on the ground lies an elephant (in all

5 Magness et al., "Huqoq Excavation," 67.

6 This overview is based on Magness et al., "Huqoq Excavation"; Magness et al., "Huqoq—2018"; Magness et al., "Huqoq—2019"; and Britt and Boustán, "Scenes."

7 Magness et al., "Huqoq Excavation," 106.

8 Two years after the panel was discovered, it was published with a comprehensive interpretation by K. Britt and R. Boustán in *The Elephant Mosaic Panel in the Synagogue at Huqoq: Official Publication and Initial Interpretations*, JRA Supplement 106 (Portsmouth, RI, 2017). However, prior to this publication, there were researchers who relied on preliminary photographs and reports and published several papers (see below, n. 98). These publications generated grievances and raised questions regarding scientific ethics. See the pointed words of J. H. Humphrey in his editorial preface to Britt and Boustán's publication: J. H. Humphrey, "JRA's Editorial Preface," in Britt and Boustán, *Elephant*, 7–8. Additional aspects of the Elephant Mosaic were discussed by Britt and Boustán in another article: R. Boustán and K. Britt, "Historical Scenes in Mosaics from Late Roman Syria and Palestine: Building on the Seleucid Past in Late Antiquity," *JLA* 14.2 (2021): 335–74.

9 The following description draws on Britt and Boustán, *Elephant*, 23–26.

10 For a detailed description of the clothing, see Britt and Boustán, *Elephant*, 37.

11 Britt and Boustán, *Elephant*, 29.



Fig. 1. The Elephant Mosaic from the Huqoq synagogue. Photo by Jim Haberman; reproduced with permission of Jodi Magness.

probability, there is another to the right of the bull, identifiable only by its tusk). A slain soldier lies facedown across the elephant with a javelin protruding from his back, while on the far left lies another soldier, also facedown, his back pierced by an arrow and his body strewn over shields, a sword, and a helmet on the ground.

The Top Register: A Military and Theological Confrontation

"Write on the Horn of a Bull": Midrash, Image, and Midrashic Image Interpretation

What is the relationship between the two camps depicted in the upper register of the panel? The depictions of swords, phalanx, and war elephants indicate

a military confrontation, but the two leaders facing each other appear to be in dialogue. Moreover, if this is a military conflict, what is the function of the bull? These questions have led some researchers (see below, pp. 217–18) to claim that the mosaic is an expression of closeness and peace rather than conflict, and that the bull is a sacrifice, expressing the covenant and brotherhood between the two camps. However, this irenic interpretation ignores the militant nature of the scene and provides no reasonable explanation for the defeated Hellenistic camp in the lower register.¹² I will

12 Britt and Boustán, *Elephant*, 25–27, 78–79, are aware of this, so they read the mosaic from the bottom up (see below, pp. 216–17). However, this reading is unreasonable; see A. Erlich, "The Patriarch and the Emperor: The Elephant Mosaic Panel in the Huqoq

argue that the mosaic presents a dual-natured dispute, in which the military conflict is parallel to a religious struggle between Greece and Israel.

The many interpretations proposed for the mosaic (see below, pp. 216–18) show that, at least for us, it is impossible to reach an unequivocal interpretation derived solely from the mosaic. This necessitates seeking texts and traditions that were probably known to the Huqoq congregation¹³ and were reflected in multiple motifs, especially those that are unusual and prominently featured in the mosaic. The most enigmatic detail in the mosaic is the bull, without which it is likely most would agree that the mosaic depicts a military conflict. The bull poses a problem for the confrontational approach because it is allegedly brought as a gift. On the other hand, the irenic approach seems to be negated by the many military elements. Since the mosaic dates to the fifth century, it is natural to seek the relevant traditions in rabbinic literature. Indeed, the connections between literature and art in general and between rabbinic literature and Jewish art in particular

Synagogue Reconsidered,” *JRA* 31 (2018): 542–58, at 542–43. In addition, in Greco-Roman art, depictions of sacrifice differ greatly from the Huqoq mosaic. Some well-known examples of sacrificial processions such as Trajan’s Column, the Decennalia Base, and others were accessible to all visitors to Rome in late antiquity (V. Huet, “Roman Sacrificial Reliefs in Rome, Italy, and Gaul: Reconstructing Archaeological Evidence?” in *Ritual Matters: Material Remains and Ancient Religion*, ed. C. Moser and J. Knust [Ann Arbor, MI, 2017], 11–32). In all of these, the sacrifice is led and offered by the *victimarii*, who were presented as low-class people (J. J. Lennon, “*Victimarii* in Roman Religion and Society,” *BSR* 83 [2015]: 65–89). In these descriptions, the emperor or ruler pours sacrificial liquids on the altar but does not approach the sacrificed animals. In addition, even the *victimarii* rarely hold the bull’s horn but only accompany the animal and at most hold the halter. Further, Jaś Elsner points to the fact that beginning in the third century, with no actual connection to the rise of Christianity, depictions of animal sacrifice are rarely found (J. Elsner, “Sacrifice in Late Roman Art,” in *Greek and Roman Animal Sacrifice: Ancient Victims, Modern Observers*, ed. C. A. Faraone and F. S. Naiden [Cambridge, 2012], 120–63). Of course, this conclusion does not rule out the possibility of sacrifices being depicted in artworks of late antiquity. However, some unequivocal indication is necessary to contend that this is a sacrificial scene (such as holding the knife over an animal or its slaughter) and that the artist deviated from the accepted artistic conventions of his time, of not depicting animal sacrifice.

13 Indeed, some researchers believe that this is the only possible way to fully decipher Jewish works of art from late antiquity. See C. Hezser and U. Leibner, “Jewish Art in Its Late Antique Context: An Introductory Essay,” in *Jewish Art in Its Late Antique Context*, ed. U. Leibner and C. Hezser (Tübingen, 2016), 1–23, at 1.

are not at all simple. Still, it seems that if there exists a midrash that contains most of the prominent elements of the mosaic, it makes room to examine the possibility of a connection between them. Below, I argue, with the necessary caution, that such a midrash exists. However, I am not claiming that the mosaic is a visual representation of the midrash, but rather that the midrash and the mosaic share common themes and motifs, each offering a slightly different interpretation.

Among the multiple exegeses in *Genesis Rabbah* (a fifth-century Palestinian midrash) on the second verse in the Bible, “The earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water” (Genesis 1:2), Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish, a third-century Palestinian rabbi, interprets the verse as an allusion to the four kingdoms:

“The earth being unformed”: this is [a reference to the empire of] Babylon [as it says] “I look at the earth, It is unformed” (Jeremiah 4:23);

“and void”: this is [a reference to the empire of the] Medes [as it says] “and hurriedly [in Hebrew, the same root as “void”] brought Haman” (Esther 6:14);

“with darkness”: this is [a reference to the empire of] Greece, who darkened the eyes of Israel with their decrees. They would say to them, write upon the horn of a bull that you have no part in the God of Israel;

“over the surface of the deep”: this is [a reference to] the evil kingdom, which is innumerable like the deep; just as the deep has no end, just so this evil kingdom.¹⁴

The exegesis for the Greek empire comprises two parts: the first asserts that the decrees of Greece darkened the eyes of Israel; the second refers to the content of a particular decree: “They would say to them, write upon the horn of a bull that you have no part in the God of Israel.” The end of this sentence describes a theological conflict between Israel and the Greek empire. The

14 *Genesis Rabbah* 2:4; see J. Theodor and C. Albeck, eds., *Midrash Bereshit Rabba*, 3 vols. (Berlin, 1912–1936; repr. Jerusalem, 1965), 1:16–17. The translation is based on “Bereishit Rabbah,” Sefaria, https://www.sefaria.org.il/Bereishit_Rabbah.2.4?lang=en&with=Jewish%20Thought&lang2=en. All biblical translations follow the JPS Tanakh translation on <https://www.sefaria.org/texts/Tanakh>.

people of Israel must deny their belief in the God of Israel by writing “upon the horn of a bull that [they] have no part in the God of Israel.”

A conflict and a bull are also significant motifs in the upper register. The bull is a central motif which, together with the leaders, stands in stark contrast to the other, less distinctive figures. On the Hellenistic side, there are seven soldiers who appear essentially identical and two battle elephants that also appear quite similar to one another. Against this rather homogeneous background, the bull stands out as a unique iconographic element, made more distinct by the purposeful use of color and shadow. The Hellenistic warriors are depicted in shades of dark red and the war elephants in dark browns. The black contours outlining the soldiers and elephants and their gear contribute to the dark, shadowy appearance of this section of the mosaic. The bull, on the other hand, is dominated by atypical, bright tones of light gray brown.¹⁵ This color scheme forges the two focal points of the register. The first is the conflict between the two leaders who fill its entire height and are positioned at its center, and the second is the bull, which, although positioned at the heart of the Hellenistic camp, is clearly separate from it by virtue of the artist’s use of color. The relationship of the Hellenistic leader to the bull is highlighted by his grasping of its horn.

Although obscure and elusive, the reference to the decree of the bull horn does have a continual traditional presence in late ancient Jewish literature.¹⁶ The most

developed source for the decree is in a Jewish interpretation from late antiquity of a first-century essay called *Megillat Tāanit* (the Scroll of Fasting). *Megillat Tāanit* is a compilation of thirty-five dates on which the Jews experienced fortunate events, most related to Hasmonaean military and political victories. The scroll marks the date and succinctly describes each event. The scholion, a commentary added later to the scroll, features different traditions, some of which were probably related to a particular event mentioned in the scroll, though others seem quite unrelated and even dubious, as in the following:¹⁷

On the twenty-seventh of it [the month of Iyar], the coronation tax (*kelilah*) was removed from Jerusalem and from Judea, and one is not to eulogize.¹⁸

That is, in the days of the Greek kingdom, crowns were made [and hung] at the entrances of shops and courtyards, and they sang songs to idols and wrote on bull horns and asses’ foreheads that their masters had no portion in the Supreme [the God of Israel], just as the Philistines did, as it is written, “No smith was to be found. . . . The charge for sharpening was a *pim* for plowshares and mattocks” (1 Samuel 13:19–21). And when the Hasmonean house overcame them, they were abolished.¹⁹

15 In most instances in Christian art, and certainly in Roman art, there was a tendency toward realism and the realistic representation of human figures. This was done by using colors both to achieve natural body tones and for shadowing and highlighting figures and body parts (J. Gage, *Color and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction* [Berkeley, 1999], 47–48). In the current context, it should be noted that in the zodiac cycle at Hammath Tiberias, as in the Sepphoris synagogue, the dominant color of the bull is black gray. The artist’s willingness to deviate from the bull’s natural colors in order to highlight its image certainly indicates that his purpose was to give it special meaning.

16 This decree appears in the following sources: Palestinian Talmud, Hagigah 2:2, 77d; Genesis Rabbah 16:4 (Theodor and Albeck, *Midrash*, 1:147–48); Leviticus Rabbah 13:5, 15:9 (M. Margulies, ed., *Midrash Wayyikra Rabbah: A Critical Edition Based on Manuscripts and Genizah Fragments with Variants and Notes*, 2 vols. [Jerusalem, 1953], 1:282, 339); Exodus Rabbah, Bo 15:17 (*Midrash Rabbah Shemot* [Lviv, 1874], 21b); Pesiqta Rabbati 33 (R. Ulmer, ed., *Pesiqta Rabbati: A Synoptic Edition of Pesiqta Rabbati Based Upon All Extant Manuscripts and the Editio Princeps*, 3 vols. [Atlanta, 1997–2002], 2:788); Midrash

Aggadah, Genesis 15 (S. Buber, ed., *Midrash Tanchuma: Ein agadischer Commentar zum Pentateuch* [Vienna, 1894], 33); Midrash Tanhuma, Genesis, va-Yechi 13 (S. Buber, ed., *Midrash Tanhuma* [Vilna, 1885], 219); Midrash Tanhuma, Leviticus, Tazria 12 (*Midrash Tanhuma* [Warsaw, 1875], Leviticus 22a); Bereshit Rabbati, va-Yechi 49:27 (H. Albeck, ed., *Midras Bereshit Rabbati* [Jerusalem, 1940], 253); and V. Noam, *Megilat Tāanit: Ha-nusahim, pishram, toldotehem; Be-tseruf mehadurah bikortit* (Jerusalem, 2003), 67–68.

17 On the scroll and its scholion, see V. Noam, “Megillat Taanit—The Scroll of Fasting,” in *The Literature of the Jewish People in the Period of the Second Temple and the Talmud*, vol. 3, *The Literature of the Sages*, part 2, *Midrash and Targum; Liturgy, Poetry, Mysticism; Contracts, Inscriptions, Ancient Science; and the Languages of Rabbinic Literature*, ed. S. Safrai, Z. Safrai, J. Schwartz, and P. J. Tomson (Assen, 2006), 339–62; for the edition and interpretation, see Noam, *Megilat Tāanit*.

18 Translation of this sentence by Noam, “Megillat Taanit,” 343.

19 Translation according to the reconstruction of the original text by Noam, *Megilat Tāanit*, 67–68.

The event noted most likely refers to the abolition of the royal taxation (*aurum coronarium*) imposed by the Seleucid Empire, a clear indication of subjugation.²⁰ Events such as this are mentioned at various times in 1 Maccabees, twice during the reign of Jonathan Apphus (1 Maccabees 10:29, 11:35) and three times during the reign of Simon Thassi (1 Maccabees 13:39, 15:2–9).²¹ The first section of the scholion contains a creative, though erroneous interpretation of the term “coronation” (*kelilah* in Aramaic), which may also be translated as “crown,” thereby pointing to the crown-like embellishments at the “entrances of shops and courtyards” in the scholion tradition. The second section features an elaborately stylized version of the bull horn tradition, with the addition of donkeys’ foreheads. Although the wording in the scholion—“their masters had no portion in the Supreme”—differs somewhat from the wording in the midrash—“[they] have no part in the God of Israel”—the meaning, requiring Jews to publicly state that they do not believe in the God of Israel, is equivalent. Indeed, 1 Maccabees and 2 Maccabees provide evidence of the Seleucids’ attempts to force the Jews of Judaea to denounce their faith in their God. Along with the decrees of Antiochus IV in 1 Maccabees 1:44–59 prohibiting the keeping of the laws of the Torah, there is also an obligation to participate in the imperial religious rites. 2 Maccabees comprehensively addresses this issue of renouncement of faith, summarizing the meaning of the decrees: “Thus there was no way to keep the Sabbath or to observe the ancestral festivals, nor even simply to admit to being a Jew” (2 Maccabees 6:6).²² The decrees were meant to create a situation in which the individual denies his Jewish identity.

The bull’s horn midrash explains that the focus of the Jewish–Greek conflict was the belief in the God of Israel. But what linked the bull’s horn to the theological conflict? Based on previous studies, Ra’anan Boustan and Karen Britt point out that the bull was a central

symbol among the Seleucid kings.²³ The most valuable and recognizable symbol on the body of the bull was its horn, as seen on coins minted in Susa in 305–301 BCE depicting Seleucus I wearing a helmet adorned with a bull’s horn. A colossal statue of Seleucus I with bull’s horns on his head stood near Antioch.²⁴

The bull also symbolized the divine right to rule in Babylonian and Iranian cultures.²⁵ Kyle Erickson has shown that the images of bull horns on coins and sculptures were intended to spread the royal propaganda that the Seleucid kings were already recognized as living gods, similar to the prevalent practice in the Ptolemaic Kingdom.²⁶ The bull’s horn midrash resonates powerfully and precisely with the deployment of the bull in the Seleucid world as a symbol of the king’s royalty and divinity. The writing on the bull’s horn, “you have no part in the God of Israel,” is simultaneously a denial by the people of Israel of their God through the content of the writing and—by using the bull’s horn, a symbol

23 Britt and Boustan, *Elephant*, 64–66, and Boustan and Britt, “Historical Scenes,” 350–54. They also note that the description of the Seleucus statue in pseudo-Callisthenes 2.28 includes a horn as a symbol of Seleucus’s kingdom. But the Seleucus statue appears only in recension gamma (H. Engelmann, *Der griechische Alexanderroman: Rezension Gamma*, book 2 [Meisenheim am Glan, 1963], 230). This recension is steeped in Jewish motifs, including Alexander’s visit to Jerusalem, but it was created in the tenth century (R. Stoneman, *The Greek Alexander Romance* [London, 1991], 14). Although Gerhard Dellling claims that recension gamma’s traditions were already prevalent among Alexandrian Jewry in the Hellenistic period (“Alexander der Grosse als Bekenner des Jüdischen Gottesglaubens,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period* 12.1 [1981]: 1–51), there is no evidence of the existence of recension gamma until the tenth century. It seems that this tradition should be seen as evidence of the prevalence of the bull’s horn as a symbol of the Seleucid Empire in late antique Jewish culture.

24 On Seleucus’s coins, see D. Ogden, *The Legend of Seleucus: Kingship, Narrative and Mythmaking in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, 2017), 61–63. On Seleucus’s statue, see A. Houghton, “A Colossal Head in Antakya and the Portraits of Seleucus I,” *Antike Kunst* 29.1 (1986): 52–62.

25 O. D. Hoover, “Never Mind the Bullocks: Taurine Imagery as a Multicultural Expression of Royal and Divine Power under Seleukos I Nikator,” in *More Than Men, Less Than Gods: Studies on Royal Cult and Imperial Worship; Proceedings of the International Colloquium Organized by the Belgian School at Athens (November 1–2, 2007)*, ed. P. P. Iossif, A. S. Chankowski, and C. C. Lorber (Leuven, 2011), 197–228.

26 K. Erickson, “Another Century of Gods? A Re-evaluation of Seleucid Ruler Cult,” *CQ* 68.1 (2018): 97–111.

20 On this tax, see V. Baesens, “Royal Taxation and Religious Tribute in Hellenistic Palestine,” in *Ancient Economies, Modern Methodologies: Archaeology, Comparative History, Models and Institutions*, ed. P. F. Bang, M. Ikeguchi, and H. G. Ziche (Bari, 2006), 179–99, at 181.

21 This is the dispatch sent by Antiochus Sidetes to Simeon in 140 BCE. It does not mention the term “aurum coronarium” (cf. τοὺς ἀνήκοντας ἡμῖν στεφάνους [1 Maccabees 11:35]). However, there is a reference to abolition from any tax paid to the Seleucid Empire.

22 D. R. Schwartz, trans., 2 *Maccabees* (Berlin, 2008), 270.

of the Seleucid king's divinity—an acknowledgment of his divinity.

Finally, it is important to note that the bull's horn midrash was probably common and well-known, as it appears in a variety of formulations in multiple Talmudic texts, including the Palestinian Talmud, *Genesis Rabbah*, *Leviticus Rabbah*, and others.²⁷ The best evidence for the presence of the midrash in late ancient Judaism is in the liturgical literature. In late ancient synagogues, those who prayed recited hymns referred to in Hebrew as *piyyutim*, composed especially by *payytanim* for each festival or holiday. In one of his Hanukkah poems, the great paytan Eleazar ha-Kalir (sixth–seventh century) described the religious persecutions that led to the rebellion. Among the decrees of the Greeks, there is a decree of “blasphemies [against God] engraved on the bull's horn.”²⁸

Neither the midrash nor the piyyut describes how the Jews responded to the demand to “write upon the horn of a bull that you have no part in the God of Israel.” It appears to me that the mosaic articulates what is absent from the text. In response to the Hellenistic decree, the Jewish leader raises his right hand and points his index finger upward, expressing his faith in the one God. As my student Hilla Cohen has suggested, the finger raised towards the sky expresses both the faith of the Jewish leader in the God of Israel who resides in the heavens and his utter rejection of the Greek leader's sacrificial offering. This interpretation is supported by Talmudic sources and Jewish art. The thrusting of arms upward as an expression of faith and confidence in God appears already in the Mishnah, the fundamental Jewish text from the third century:

“And it came to pass, when Moses held up his hand, that Israel prevailed; and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed” (Exodus 17:11). Did the hands of Moses make war when he raised them or break war when he lowered them? Rather, the verse comes to tell you that as long as the Jewish people turned their eyes upward and subjected their hearts to their

Father in Heaven, they prevailed, but if not, they fell.²⁹

Thus, the upward-pointed hand signifies the recognition by the people of Israel in the existence of the Lord in heaven and their willingness to obey him. According to the Mishnah, by looking at objects directed upward toward heaven (Moses's hands), the people of Israel were symbolically recognizing their acceptance of and belief in God. An effective rendering of this notion appears in the following late midrash:

“A Jewish man” (Esther 2:5)—What makes a man Jewish? That he sanctifies the name of the Almighty to all the world's inhabitants. When? When he did not bow to Haman. Did Mordechai ignore the King's order? No, because when King Achashverosh [Xerxes] ordained that all must bow to Haman the wicked Haman inscribed on his chest “we worship idols” saying let the Jews bow to idol worship and they will be annihilated by their own God; when he rode past Mordechai, Haman was boasting about his horse, so Mordechai lifted his hand to heaven and told Haman, “We have a master who prides himself above all the proud in the world, so how can we discard a master that lives and exists forever and forever, and why will we bow to an idol worshipper (as is inscribed on your heart) to flesh and blood that is here today and gone tomorrow to his grave.” Haman immediately became furious.³⁰

This midrash contains many motifs that are reflected in the Huqoq mosaic. Both share a religious conflict—Haman wants the Jews to bow before idols and presents a tangible object, a medallion engraved with the picture of an idol. Mordechai raises his hand upward to signal his denial and refusal to obey Haman. Mordechai explains that the supremacy of God is not just as residing in heaven, but rather, God is supreme, infinitely

27 For the various rabbinic sources, see above, n. 16.

28 The piyyut was printed and interpreted by E. Fleischer, *Hebrew Poetry in Spain and Communities under Its Influence*, 3 vols. (Jerusalem, 2010), 1:168–75, at 173.

29 Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 3:8; for the translation, see “Mishnah Rosh Hashanah,” Sefaria, https://www.sefaria.org.il/Mishnah_Rosh_Hashanah?lang=en.

30 Midrash Panim Acherim, version B, paragraph 6; see S. Buber, ed., *Sammlung Agadischer Commentare zum Buche Ester: Enthält: Midrasch Abba Gorion; Midrasch Ponim Acherim; Midrasch Lekach Tob* (Vilna, 1894), 82.

superior to all creatures and indeed to the idol worshipped by Haman. The upraised hand has the double meaning of belief in God in heaven and faith that God is supreme and superior to all creatures.

It is worth mentioning that the prayer *'Aleinu l'shabeḥ* ([It is] our duty to praise), which was said in late antiquity, presents a poignant contrast between the Jewish belief in one God and gentile belief in idols: "It is our duty to praise the Lord of all. . . . For they [gentiles] bow to vanity and emptiness and pray to a god who cannot save. But we prostrate [ourselves] [before] the king of kings, the holy one, blessed is he. He stretches out the heavens and establishes the earth. His seat of glory is in the heavens above, and his powerful presence is in the highest heights. He is our God, there is no other."³¹ In this prayer, the worshiper declares loyalty to God, the world's Creator, whose place "is in the highest heights." To clarify, my claim is not that the prayer *'Aleinu l'shabeḥ* is a basis for the mosaic in Huqoq, but rather that the existence of a polemical concept in both midrashic and contemporary liturgy positing God in heaven makes it reasonable to attribute this meaning to this motif in Jewish art from both.

A similar iconographic representation that utilizes an index finger pointing heavenward to indicate a connection to God can be seen in the fresco depicting the vision of the valley of dry bones at the Dura-Europos synagogue. The image of Ezekiel appears three times on the left side of the fresco with the hand of God depicted above each figure.³² The faces of all three "Ezekiels" are turned toward the sky with one hand raised towards the firmament with the index figure pointing upward. It is likely that each of these renderings of Ezekiel and the hand of God hints at one of the instances in which God summons the prophet. The hand of God above the

far-left figure is probably a figurative attempt to express the verse, "The hand of the Lord came upon me. He took me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the valley" (Ezekiel 37:1). Thus, the other two figures represent two other instances in which God reveals himself to the prophet (Ezekiel 37:4, 9).³³ It is also conceivable that this motif carries the same polemic connotation elsewhere in the Huqoq mosaic. While this article was being written, a panel was discovered at the eastern corner of the north aisle. The panel appears to depict Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, the three children who were thrust into a fiery furnace by Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 3). The boys' right hands are raised with their index fingers pointing skyward. It seems that the finger pointing upward to the heavens simultaneously indicates the boys' faith in God and their refusal to bow down to an image of Nebuchadnezzar.³⁴ It appears, therefore, that in the Huqoq mosaic, the index finger pointing imports both absolute faith in and commitment to the one Jewish God and the refusal to believe in or worship other gods.³⁵

Vestis virum facit (I):

Dress and Identity—Warriors and Rabbis

If indeed the mosaic depicts the military and religious confrontation between the Hasmoneans and the Seleucids, the question arises as to whether we can identify the displayed figures. The garb of a high-ranking military commander worn by the Hellenistic leader, including a diadem tied around his head (διάδημα), a purple cloak (χλαμύς), and a cuirass (*lorica*), has led many scholars to the conclusion that this is a Hellenistic king embarking on a military campaign. Since the scene depicts a conflict between a Hellenistic kingdom and the Jews, the Hellenistic leader might be identified as Antiochus IV, who imposed religious decrees and

31 The text is according to the Genizah fragment (Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, T-S H8, 40). Translation is based on J. Hoffman, "The Image of the Other in Jewish Interpretations of *Aleinu*," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 10.1 (2015): 1–41, at 2. There is an ongoing debate concerning the time the prayer was composed. The earliest suggested date is the Second Temple period, and the latest is the third century (see M. Katz, "*Aleinu*—A Prayer Common to Jews and Gentile God-Fearers," in *Judaism's Challenge: Election, Divine Love, and Human Enmity*, ed. A. Goshen-Gottstein [Boston, 2020], 83–97, at 86–90). However, scholars agree that in the fifth century the prayer was already included in the Jewish liturgy.

32 It is customary to mark this section as section A of panel NC; see C. H. Kraeling, *The Synagogue Excavations at Dura-Europos, Final Report VIII*, part 1, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT, 1979), 178–80.

33 I have adopted the connection to these verses suggested by E. G. Kraeling, "The Meaning of the Ezekiel Panel in the Synagogue at Dura," *BASOR* 78 (1940): 12–18, at 12–13. Others have proposed other, slightly different verses (see Kraeling, *Dura-Europos*, 190, n. 742, and Kraeling's own suggestion, *ibid.*, 191–92).

34 Britt and Boustan, "Scenes," 553–61, depict the scene as a refusal-to-worship scene, but they don't deal with the positive meaning embedded in the index finger pointing upward.

35 Obviously, the meaning of the upward-pointing index finger is contingent on the precise position of the finger and the direction in which it is pointed, as well as the broader context of the scene. I am grateful to Shulamit Lederman for her assistance on this topic.

sent his marshals and troops to crush the Hasmonean rebels.³⁶ Naturally, this conclusion points in a particular direction regarding the identity of the Jewish figure with different possible options: Mattathias Hasmonean, Judas Maccabee, Eleazar, or someone else.³⁷ Yet it is doubtful whether the Jews of late antiquity knew any of these names. Although the Jewish sources mention the name Antiochus several times as a moniker for a foreign king, there is no specific detail that links this king to the Hasmoneans.³⁸ Furthermore, beards were unpopular among the Hellenistic kings and most Roman emperors, so it is unlikely that a late antique artist would add a beard to a Hellenistic king.³⁹ As for the Hasmoneans, the findings are not much better. The term “Hasmonean house” appears numerous times in rabbinic literature, and all those mentions revolve around military campaigns against the Seleucids and the non-Jewish population in the Land of Israel. As Vered Noam has noted, these victories are rarely attributed to any single figure; even Judah Maccabee is not mentioned by name.⁴⁰

36 Indeed, Janine Balty suggests the same; see J. Balty, “La ‘mosaïque à l’éléphant’ de Huqoq: Un document très convoité et d’interprétation controversée,” *JRA* 31 (2018): 509–12, at 511.

37 All these suggestions were proposed by scholars (see below, nn. 40–43).

38 These are the sources in which Antiochus is mentioned: *Seder Olam Rabbah* 30 (C. Milikowsky, ed., *Seder Olam: Critical Edition, Commentary and Introduction*, 2 vols. [Jerusalem, 2013], 1:323), in a list of a number of kings without historical context; *Genesis Rabbah* 23:1 (Theodor and Albeck, *Midrash*, 1:221) with Antiochus as the founder of Antioch; and in *Megillat Ta’anit*, where it is relayed that a holiday was instituted in commemoration of the elimination of Antiochus’s siege (*Megillat Ta’anit*, 28th Shevat [Noam, *Megilat Ta’anit*, 115]). Indeed, Antiochus IV visited Jerusalem (1 Maccabees 1:21–23; 2 Maccabees 5:11–16), but neither source states that he laid siege upon the city. According to most scholars, *Megillat Ta’anit* refers to Antiochus V who laid siege to Jerusalem in 162 BC (1 Maccabees 6:51–60 [Noam, *Megilat Ta’anit*, 298–300]).

39 See the detailed discussion in C. Oldstone-Moore, *Of Beards and Men: The Revealing History of Facial Hair* (Chicago, 2015), 38–62.

40 This is how the Palestinian Talmud brings the tradition on the Day of Nicanor: “[A] ruler of the kingdom of Greece” wanted to destroy Jerusalem but “one of the Hasmonean dynasty went forth toward him and killed members of his troops” (Palestinian Talmud, *Ta’anit* 2:13, 66a; translation according to V. Noam, *Shifting Images of the Hasmoneans: Second Temple Legends and Their Reception in Josephus and Rabbinic Literature* [Oxford, 2018], 35). Noam, *Shifting Images*, 202–3, has convincingly shown that rabbis systematically removed the name of Judah Maccabee from the text, replacing it with the general appellation “one of the Hasmonean house.”

If, however, the mosaic is a visual depiction of the decree “Write on the horn of a bull,” then the Hellenistic figure would not represent a particular king but rather the Greek kingdom that “darkened the eyes of Israel with [its] decrees,” with the bearded leader of the right-hand group personifying the Hellenistic culture and regime. In this case, it is likely that the Jewish leader would personify the Jewish leadership. This approach might also provide an answer to the question of the beard. Although beards were not popular among Hellenistic kings and most Roman emperors, Zeus was depicted with a magnificent beard.⁴¹

This insight demands closer scrutiny of the garb worn by the group on the left, representing Israel and perhaps even Judaism. If we were dealing with the historical conflict between the Maccabees and the Seleucid Empire, the Jewish leader could have been represented in one of two ways: as a high priest or a king. But this leader wears nothing that would identify him as either.⁴² The white tunics worn by the Jewish figures in the upper and middle registers⁴³ are distinctively Roman and were worn by all social classes, apparently contributing little to their identification. Closer examination, however, indicates that the garments of both the leader and his followers comprise two parts: a close-fitting tunic with long sleeves adorned with two dark stripes around the wrist and a *pallium*, a version of the

Indeed, “Mattathias the high priest, son of Yohanan,” is mentioned just once in Babylonian Talmud, *Megillah* 11a as one of the leaders who saved Israel from the “Greeks”; other leaders are Simon the Just and Hasmonai and his sons. The reader gets the impression that Mattathias is not part of the Hasmonean family.

41 On Zeus’s beard, see Oldstone-Moore, *Of Beards*, 43.

42 There are indeed very few iconographic representations of Aaron in synagogue art; however, the depiction in Dura-Europos teaches us that the painter painted an image quite similar in terms of the clothing mentioned in the Bible, as Kraeling has noted (Kraeling, *Dura-Europos*, 127–28). Regarding depictions of kings, assuming that the Meroth mosaic represents the image of King David, it is noteworthy that this figure is wearing some kind of ornament (perhaps a diadem) around its head, as well as a purple cloak (*χλαμύς*). David as Orpheus in Gaza is dressed in a large purple robe over a white tunic, whereas Samuel the prophet is wearing a tunic with a clavus and a white pallium with an H-shaped appendage. For the iconography of David in synagogue art, see G. G. Xeravits, “The Reception of the Figure of David in Late Antique Synagogue Art,” in *Figures Who Shape Scriptures, Scriptures that Shape Figures: Essays in Honour of Benjamin G. Wright III*, ed. G. G. Xeravits and G. S. Goering (Berlin, 2018): 71–92.

43 Britt and Boustán, *Elephant*, 31.



Fig. 2. Hypogeum of the Aurelii, cubiculum B, south wall. Photo courtesy of the Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra.

Greek cloak known as ἱμάτιον or τριβων,⁴⁴ which hangs over the left shoulder and passes under the right armpit. These pallia are decorated with the Greek letter *eta* (H), which I will discuss below.

It is more than likely that the decision to dress the Judean figures in pallia was deliberate, as in contrast to the Hellenistic camp's typically militaristic uniform, the pallium was a garment customarily worn by philosophers and scholars rather than by those associated with the military or warfare in late antiquity. Evidence of this is prevalent in both the literary imagery and iconography of late antiquity,⁴⁵ including frescoes and sarcophagi.

44 The most distinctive feature of the pallium is its rectangular shape and the fact that it is draped over one shoulder. See M. Bieber, "Roman Men in Greek Himation (Romani Palliati): A Contribution to the History of Copying," *PAPS* 103 (1959): 374–417, at 398.

45 In the literature of antiquity, the appearance of the philosopher was established, and one of the most prominent characteristics of this look was the *himation*. This aspect also remained during late antiquity; see R. R. R. Smith, "Late Roman Philosopher Portraits from Aphrodisias," *JRS* 80 (1990): 127–55, at 149–50. However, there are

The fresco of the Hypogeum Aurelii (Fig. 2) contains a row of figures dressed in tunics and pallia with some holding scrolls, indicating that they are scholars.⁴⁶ In

scholars who differentiate between the Roman pallium and the Greek himation; see C. Baroin and E. Valette-Cagnac, "S'habiller et se déshabiller en Grèce et à Rome (III): Quand les Romains s'habillaient à la grecque ou les divers usages du *pallium*," *RH* 643.3 (2007): 517–51.

46 The religious identity of the figures is debatable. Recently, John Bradley convincingly argued that the twelve figures are members of a *collegium*. This particular collegium emphasized learning and literacy (J. W. Bradley, *The Hypogeum of the Aurelii: A New Interpretation as the Collegiate Tomb of Professional Scribes* [Oxford, 2018], 102–11). According to Arthur Urbano, there is a consensus as to their being scholars (A. P. Urbano Jr., "The Philosopher Type in Late Roman Art: Problematising Cultural Appropriation in Light of Cultural Competition," in *Religious Competition in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. N. P. DesRosiers and L. C. Vuong [Atlanta, 2016], 27–40, at 27). The image of the scholar or philosopher on sarcophagi of late antiquity is discussed broadly in P. Zanker, *The Mask of Socrates: The Image of the Intellectual in Antiquity*, trans. A. Shapiro (Berkeley, 1995), 267–84. On the centrality of the pallium in the iconography of the scholar, see Urbano, "Philosopher," 29–30, who argues that the pallium was the most distinctive motif in this iconography; see also A. P. Urbano,

the late third century, the pallium was adopted by the Christians to replace the toga as a distinguishing mark of their disengagement from the opulent and corrupt Roman world. As in Roman culture, the pallium symbolized scholarship for the Christians, but it also signified an ethical way of life and Christian piety.⁴⁷

It is more than likely that the Jews, like the Christians, appropriated the pallium from the Roman world to symbolize a life of religious learning and pedagogy. Thus, for example, the frescoes at the Dura-Europos synagogue have depictions of the leading biblical figures, Abraham, Moses, and Elijah, wearing pallia. Arthur Urbano notes that in several scenes in which a biblical figure appears alongside other Israelites, only the important personality is depicted wearing a pallium. For example, in the scene showing the miracle of the well, Moses is draped in a pallium, whereas the people of Israel wear only tunics (Fig. 3).⁴⁸ Some scholars argued that the figure depicted wearing a pallium in the four panels on the Western Wall above the Holy Ark (Fig. 4) is Moses symbolized as a teacher and/or a rabbi.⁴⁹ In rabbinic literature, the pallium is referred to as a *tallith* (prayer shawl),⁵⁰ and according to scholars, the rabbis wrapping themselves in tallithot while studying

and teaching Torah⁵¹ are parallel to the association between learning and the pallium in Greco-Roman culture.

It appears that in our mosaic, “Israel” from the midrash is represented by a leader who is primarily a scholar. Though the military nature of the conflict depicted in the upper and lower registers does not enable him to carry scrolls into the battlefield, he carries one in the middle register. In the conflict portrayed in the upper register, the leader’s religious affiliation is expressed by raising his right hand heavenward. His other hand seems to be holding some object apparently on or embedded in the Greek leader’s arm, though the object and the meaning of the gesture are difficult to identify.⁵²

Like their leader, the youths are dressed in white pallia. Clearly cumbersome, they are not suited for battle, although their presence complements the image of the Jewish cohort as a group of young students led by a rabbinic leader. Indeed, the leader’s superiority is only indicated by his size and position in the register. The entire Jewish group is clothed in identical pallia, in contrast to the Hellenistic group, in which the hierarchy between the leader and the soldiers is clearly delineated by their garb, with the leader’s clothing adorned with a royal insignia while the soldiers wear helmets, have a different type of armor, and are armed with spears and shields. Thus, the difference between the groups is marked both ethnically—Greeks against Israelites—and in terms of sociocultural imagery. On one side, the orderly and well-equipped Hellenistic army, and on the other, a cohort of students led by their rabbi.

“Literary and Visual Images of Teachers in Late Antiquity,” in *Teachers in Late Antique Christianity*, ed. P. Gemeinhardt, O. Lorgeaux, and M. Munkholt Christensen (Tübingen, 2018), 1–31, at 15–20.

47 For the Christians’ appropriation of the pallium, see A. P. Urbano, “Dressing a Christian: The Philosopher’s Mantle as Signifier of Pedagogical and Moral Authority,” *StP* 62 (2013): 213–29, at 218–21, and A. P. Urbano, “Sizing Up the Philosopher’s Cloak: Christian Verbal and Visual Representations of the *Tribōn*,” in *Dressing Judeans and Christians in Antiquity*, ed. K. Upson-Saia, C. Daniel-Hughes, and A. J. Batten (Farnham, 2014), 175–94, at 182–86.

48 A. P. Urbano, “Fashioning Witnesses: ‘Hebrews’ and ‘Jews’ in Early Christian Art,” in *A Most Reliable Witness: Essays in Honor of Ross Shepard Kraemer*, ed. S. Ashbrook Harvey, N. DesRosiers, S. L. Lander, J. Z. Pastis, and D. Ullucci (Providence, RI, 2015), 89–100, at 94.

49 S. Fine, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World: Toward a New Jewish Archaeology* (Cambridge, 2005), 179, and R. Hachlili, *Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology in the Diaspora* (Leiden, 1998), 111–13. For other identifications (e.g., Ezra the scribe), see Hachlili, *Ancient Jewish Art*, 113.

50 On the similarity between the pallium and the tallith, see D. Sperber, *Material Culture in Eretz Israel during the Talmudic Period*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem, 1993), 1:132–35, and D. Shlezinger-Katsman, “Clothing,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Daily Life in Roman Palestine*, ed. C. Hezser (Oxford, 2010), 362–81, at 367–70.

51 Tosefta Hagigah 2:1; Leviticus Rabbah 37:3. See also C. Hezser, *Rabbinic Body Language: Non-Verbal Communication in Palestinian Rabbinic Literature of Late Antiquity* (Leiden, 2017), 41–51.

52 The identity of the object is unclear, and each scholar has interpreted it according to his general interpretation of the mosaic. Some claim that it is a coin, which in turn supports the tendency to interpret the scene as an exchange of gifts (Britt and Boustan, *Elephant*, 31–33, 80). Balty, “Mosaique,” 511, in keeping with her military interpretation, argues that it is a sword. A. Yosef, “The ‘Elephant Mosaic’ Panel from the Huqoq Synagogue: Ehud Ben Gera in Jewish-Galilean Traditions,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period* 52.2 (2021): 257–78, at 262 and n. 18, suggests the same. Erlich, “Patriarch,” 553, n. 70, does not offer a definitive answer but tends to identify it as a clod of earth symbolic of the fertile lands that Caracalla gifted to Rabbi Judah the Patriarch. B. D. Gordon and Z. Weiss, “Samuel and Saul at Gilgal: A New Interpretation of the Elephant Mosaic Panel in the Huqoq Synagogue,” *JRA* 31 (2018): 524–41, at 525–26, suggest that this is merely a decorative ornament.

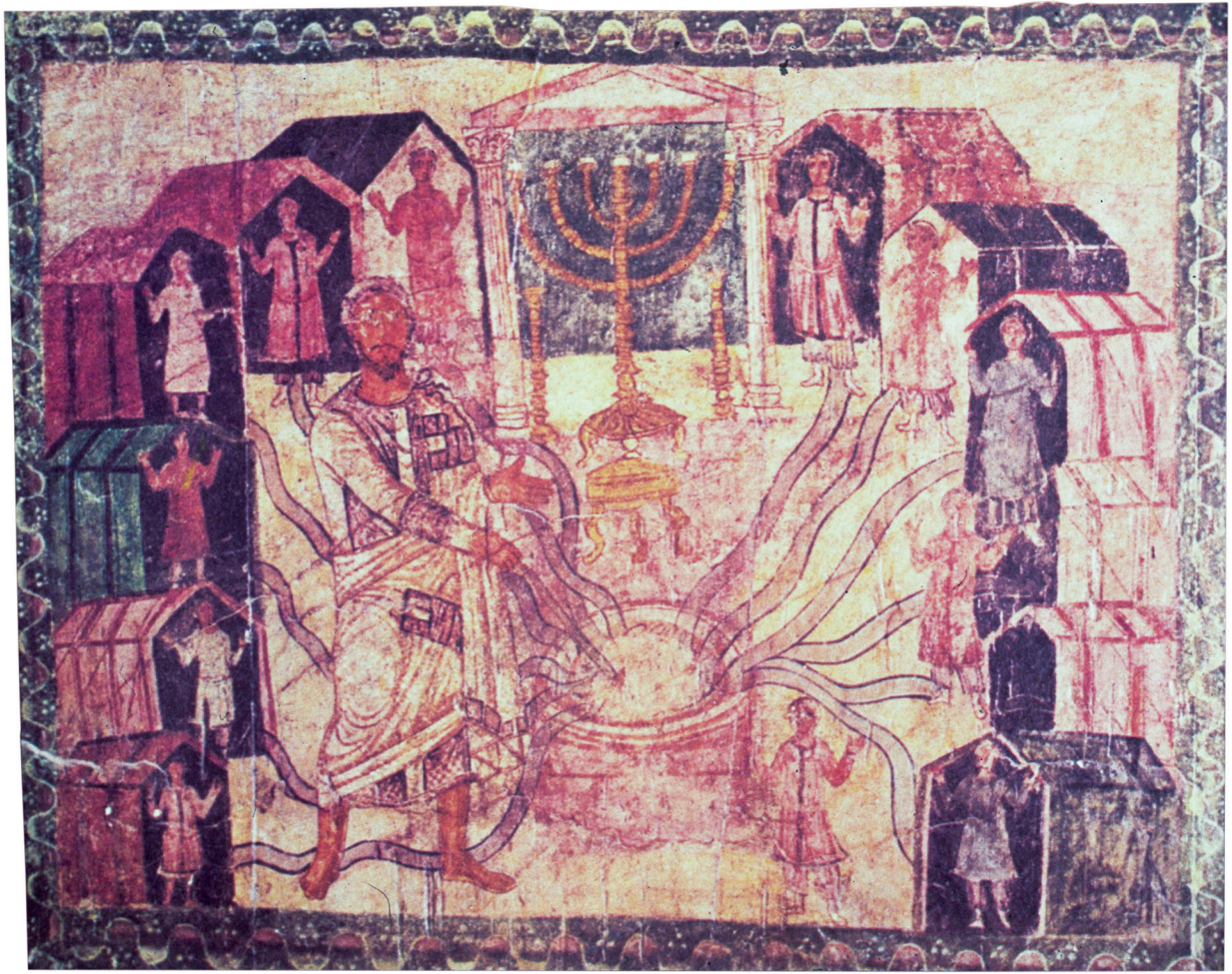


Fig. 3. Well of Miriam, Dura-Europos synagogue, 250 CE. Note the symbol “H” on the hems. Photo courtesy of the Center for Jewish Art, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

A midrash that has been given little attention so far contains a similar contrast:

Levi is juxtaposed to the Greek kingdom. The former being the third tribe and the latter the third kingdom. The name of the former consists of three letters, and that of the latter consists of three letters. The former blow horns and the latter blow *solpirim*. The former wear turbans and the latter wear *qisim*. The former wear breeches and the latter wear *femamalia*.⁵³ Now the latter are many while the former are but few

in number, yet the many came and fell by the hands of the few. For whose sake was that? It was for the blessing of Moses: “Smite the loins of his foes” (Deuteronomy 33:11)—by whose hand will the Greek kingdom fall? By the hand of the Hasmoneans, descended from Levi.⁵⁴

The midrash compares the Levites to the Greek soldiers.⁵⁵ The Greeks wear helmets, whereas in Exodus

53 There are numerous versions of this word, but all point to *feminalia* (φεινάλια), which means “tight-fitting trousers”; see Sperber, *Culture*, 1:151–54.

54 Genesis Rabbah 99:2; see Theodor and Albeck, *Midrash*, 3:1274; translation based on H. Freedman and M. Simon, trans., *Midrash Rabbah*, vol. 2, *Genesis* (London, 1939), 974.

55 Although the exegesis opens with “Levites,” in light of the articles of clothing noted later, it appears that the exegete is referring to *kohanim* (priests), which corresponds to the exegesis that mentions the Hasmoneans.



Fig. 4.
Moses, Dura-Europos
synagogue. Photo courtesy of
the Center for Jewish Art, the
Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

28:40, the Levites wear turbans; the Greeks wear *feminalia* (tight-fitting trousers), whereas the Levites wear loose trousers; and the Greeks blow trumpets, whereas the Levites blow horns—that is, *shofarot*. Following this juxtaposition, the exegete arrives at the crucial distinction that “the latter are many while the former are but few,” and still “the many fell by the hands of the few.” Although the description of the attire in the

midrash differs from that depicted in the mosaic, they both highlight the presence of differences between the groups in terms of their garb.

The most enigmatic visual symbol in the mosaic is the geometric sign H appended to the hems of the pallia worn by the Jewish group. This shape is part of a repertoire of geometric adornments called *gammadia* (from the Greek letter Γ [gamma]), which were very common

in the material culture of late antique Palestine.⁵⁶ Two types of gammadia are known from ancient Jewish clothing culture, a jagged-edged Γ and a jagged-edged rectangle. Both were discovered on pieces of textile found and identified by Yigael Yadin as tallithot, which he excavated at the Bar Kochba caves and Masada. They were also found on the himatia of many figures in the Dura-Europos synagogue (Figs. 3 and 4).⁵⁷

The few scholars who have addressed this issue have stressed the obscurity of the geometrical appendage. Yadin was of the opinion that these were simply ornaments, which over time evolved into markings of gender.⁵⁸ Some scholars endowed them with religious meaning,⁵⁹ while others viewed them as social status

56 See O. Peleg-Barkat, "Interpreting the Uninterpreted: Art as a Means of Expressing Identity in Early Roman Judaea," in *Jewish Art in Its Late Antique Context*, ed. U. Leibner and C. Hezser (Tübingen, 2016), 27–48, at 32.

57 In Christian-Byzantine art, the ancient geometrical adornment was transformed into the Greek letter gamma to which it bears a close resemblance. This led the way for the use of other Greek letters, including Z, N, and, of course, H, as appendages added to pallia. In recent years, Cristina and Fabio Cumbo have been engaged in an effort to categorize all of the varieties of the gammadia symbols; see C. Cumbo and F. Cumbo, "GMS—Gammadiae Management System: Cataloguing and Interpretation Project of the So-Called *Gammadiae* Starting from the Iconographic Evidences [*sic*] in the Roman Catacombs," *Conservare Patrimônio* 31 (2019): 145–54. The topic has been discussed in numerous papers by Maciej Szymaszek. For a designated discussion on the symbol H, see M. Szymaszek, "On the Interpretation of Textile Finds with Right-Angled or H-Shaped Tapestry Bands," in *Textiles, Tools and Techniques of the 1st Millennium AD from Egypt and Neighbouring Countries: Proceedings of the 8th Conference of the Research Group "Textiles from the Nile Valley" Antwerp, 4–6 October 2013*, ed. A. De Moor, C. Fluck, and P. Linscheid (Tiel, 2015), 169–97. I thank Maciej Szymaszek for making his publications available to me.

58 Y. Yadin, *Bar Kokhba: The Rediscovery of the Legendary Hero of the Last Jewish Revolt against Imperial Rome* (London, 1971), 124–33. This assumption was refuted by discoveries made in Egypt; see A. Sheffer and H. Granger-Taylor, "Textiles from Masada: A Preliminary Selection," in *Masada IV: The Yigael Yadin Excavations 1963–1965, Final Reports*, ed. J. Aviram, G. Foerster, and E. Netzer (Jerusalem, 1994), 153–282, at 240.

59 This is Goodenough's suggestion (E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, vol. 9, *Symbolism in the Dura Synagogue* [New York, 1964], 162–64). See the literature noted in Peleg-Barkat, "Interpreting," 32, n. 23, and C. Cumbo's detailed overview, "La questione delle 'gammadiae': Rassegna degli studi," *Augustinianum* 57.2 (2017): 515–39. According to Antonio Quacquarelli, the letter H, which symbolizes the number 8 in Greek gematria, is related to Christian symbolism associated with the resurrection of Christ; see A. Quacquarelli, "Il monogramma cristologico

symbols, similar to the *clavi*, the colorful bands which will be discussed below.⁶⁰ Whatever the exact meaning and roots of the symbol H, by the third century it had become part of the visual language and an accepted decoration of the pallia and tallithot of Jewish leaders, as seen in Dura-Europos. Thus, it is probable that this symbol plays the same role in Huqoq.

The differences between the groups are not only in the dress and appearance but also in the composition and the relationships visible between the individuals within each group. The Hellenistic leader's superiority is apparent in his full set of royal attire. In contrast, the other Greek figures are soldiers wearing helmets and equipped with spears and shields. They stand shoulder to shoulder in a straight line with their lower bodies concealed by the bull. The absolute uniformity in the Greek camp, the soldiers' "frozen" posture, and partial exposure of their bodies are contrasted with the leader's full-bodied image, movement, and vitality. These differences clearly denote the social and cultural gap between the leader and the soldiers, while their fixed and uniform images strip them of their individuality and position them as mere cogs in the Hellenistic war machine.

In contrast, all the members of the Jewish group are depicted as relative equals with their figures fully articulated and their differing gestures indicating their unique identities. While these details underscore the individuality of each member of the Jewish group, there is also a significant measure of equality between the leader and the soldiers. All the Jewish figures, without exception, are dressed in identical tunics with two stripes on the arms and in white pallia with the H sign adorning their hems. The status of the Jewish leader is distinguished from the others by his physical size (approximately double compared to the others), beard, and white hair rather than in terms of his dress. These may indicate that the older man's leadership is based on his personal qualities, old age (which symbolizes life experience), wisdom, and guidance. It is only fitting to mention here the words of fourth-century Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus: [*E*]t ubique patrum reverenda cum auctoritate canities (Everywhere

(gammadia) H," *VetChr* 16.1 (1979): 5–20. For an extensive yet critical survey of Quacquarelli, see C. Cumbo, "L'ogdoade cristiana: Riflessioni e ipotesi a partire dagli studi di Antonio Quacquarelli," *De medio aevo* 7.1 (2018): 259–76.

60 Gordon and Weiss, "Samuel," 525.

the white hair of the senators and their authority are revered).⁶¹ The composition and attire of the two groups create the impression that the confrontation is not between two camps of warriors but between two cultural worlds. The Hellenistic world is represented through the warriors, war elephants, and the king-general, whereas Judaism is represented by the partnership of Torah study and the war for Torah, as depicted by a group of students led by their rabbi.

The Middle Register: Warriors and a Rabbi

The upper register represents a snapshot of a moment in the conflict. There is a particularly strong sense of movement on the left side, where the figures appear to maintain an active stance in the face of the opposing camp. The Hellenistic leader on the right appears to be in motion with the soldiers apparently alert and ready for action. In contrast, the figures in the middle and lower registers are stationary, primarily indicating outcomes of the upper register. Indeed, while the upper register denotes a sense of a power balance between the camps, the outcomes of the conflict, as depicted in the middle and lower registers, are different between the two groups. While in the top register they stood facing one another, the other two depict the Hellenistic group lying defeated at the feet of the Jewish group.

Vestis virum facit (II):

Dress and Social Status in the Huqoq Mosaic

Then as now, *vestis virum facit*, and the color and style of clothing as well as the embellishments indicated an individual's membership in a particular group and a certain social stratum.⁶² At first sight, the figures in the middle register appear to be the same as those on the left in the upper one, but meticulous comparison of the composition and the clothing reveals important differences. The upper register depicts a group of individuals wearing the same garb, whereas in the middle

register, there is a distinct hierarchy between the old man and the young men in both composition and dress. The most conspicuous difference between the leader and the other members of the group is that the former is now seated on a chair while the others stand at his sides. Roman and Byzantine art show well-documented distinctions between figures depicted as sitting or standing, with the senior personage seated on a lavish chair flanked by standing figures.⁶³ This also appears in rabbinic literature, in which the obligation to stand in honor of an elder and the duty of a student to stand when engaging with his rabbi are discussed widely.⁶⁴ Relative size is often another indicator of seniority, with the authoritative figure occupying more space than the others, and indeed in the middle register the seated figure is positioned under an arch that is approximately 20 percent wider than those above the others. An additional noted distinction between the younger men and their leader is visible in the objects they hold. As in the upper register, the soldiers are portrayed as carrying swords, while the elder grasps an open scroll, already a distinctive symbol of erudition and literacy in the Hellenistic age.⁶⁵ Ornamentation of Roman sarcophagi of scholars from the third century usually features a central figure holding a scroll, indicating the status of the deceased as teacher and pedagogue with surrounding figures depicting their students. This iconographic image was also well-integrated into early Christian art.⁶⁶

Two other areas of distinction merit discussion: comparison between the upper and middle registers and comparison of the seated elder with the standing soldiers. As mentioned above, the similar clothing worn by the leader and soldiers in the upper register conveys a sense of equality and uniformity, in contrast to the middle register, in which trimmings appearing on the attire of the elder differ from those on the garments of the soldier-students. Here, the old man's tunic is adorned by two dark stripes descending from the neckline of his tunic—each a common appendage called a *clavus*. Two clavi have also been added to the

61 Amm. Marc. 14.6.6; text and translation according to J. C. Rolfe, ed. and trans., *Ammianus Marcellinus, History*, vol. 1, Loeb 300 (Cambridge, MA, 1950), 38–39. See also T. G. Parkin, *Old Age in the Roman World: A Cultural and Social History* (Baltimore, 2003), 105. The connection between white hair, old age, and wisdom is recognized also in Jewish sources (e.g., Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 28a).

62 Valuable studies on the meaning of dress in the Roman world can be found in J. Edmondson and A. Keith, eds., *Roman Dress and the Fabrics of Roman Culture* (Toronto, 2008).

63 G. Davies, "On Being Seated: Gender and Body Language in Hellenistic and Roman Art," in *Body Language in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, ed. D. L. Cairns (Swansea, 2005), 215–38, at 217.

64 Palestinian Talmud, Bikkurim 3:3, 65c–65d; Babylonian Talmud, Qiddushin 32b–33a; and Hezser, *Rabbinic Body Language*, 75–83.

65 Zanker, *Socrates*, 193–97.

66 Zanker, *Socrates*, 268–97, followed by Urbano, "Literary," 15–18.

robes of the young men, yet unlike those of their senior, these ribbons, as well as the two stripes on their arms, are adorned with white buttons. Moreover, *segmenta* (ornate patches) have been added on their right shoulders, as have *orbiculi* (circular appendages) at the bottom of the tunics.

These appendages grant social status to the wearer in a way that is similar to the status conveyed by the type of garment (i.e., pallium). The width of the clavus was an indicator of one's social status during the republican and early imperial periods.⁶⁷ It is likely that at a certain stage, other adornments were for decorative purposes and also bore social significance.⁶⁸ In any case, from the evidence in mosaics, frescoes, and even the material relics of clothing, it has become clear that these different types of appendages were worn by members of all social circles and classes⁶⁹ and that they may not carry any particular meaning. However, assuming their appearance in the middle register was a conscious choice on the part of the artist, the distinct gap between the ornamented and non-ornamented dress begs an explanation.

It is probable that even after the clavi and other appendages became more common, their earlier significance as illustrations of prestige and high social status remained familiar and well-known. Thus, the transition in the mosaic from the representation of an egalitarian social order—void of status-designating emblems—in the upper register to the use of dress and composition as a means of indicating and defining social hierarchy in the middle register is conscious and deliberate. The

Jewish group, led by the elder, triumphed over the “Greek Empire” and is therefore granted the emblems of prestige.

Here it is worthwhile to point to other distinguishing indicators between the older man and the younger ones. The elder's pallium is adorned with only two clavi and two H symbols; by contrast, the young men's clothes are further decorated with their orbiculi, clavi, and segmenta and are embedded with white buttons. In late antiquity, these additional decorations were largely associated with royal attire, such as when the emperor Constantine appropriated the traditional Hellenistic diadem and enhanced the earlier simple ribbon by decorating it with pearls and precious stones.⁷⁰ Later, other articles of Byzantine royal dress were inlaid with gems and pearls.⁷¹ The adornment of clothing and objects with gems and expensive jewelry, in both reality and Christian mosaics, originated in imperial iconography, which in late antiquity became part of the triumphant Church's visual culture.⁷² In Huqoq, the addition of royal insignia on the clothing of the Jews signifies that their victory granted them a form of royal status.

The composition of the middle register is similar to those found primarily on Roman sarcophagi of late antiquity. The sarcophagus of L. Pullius Peregrinus, a public figure among the social class of *equites* (cavalrymen in Rome in the mid-third century), is decorated with a rich relief (Fig. 5). Pullius himself is depicted as seated in the center, holding an open scroll with both hands. He is flanked on each side by two rows of pallium-garbed figures with some facing Pullius while others appear to be conversing with one another. This composition implies that the deceased was a learned man and emphasizes his commitment to teaching his disciples.⁷³ Like the pallium, Christian art in late antiquity adopted this composition style, and many sarcophagi and mosaics depict Jesus holding a scroll while surrounded by his apostles.⁷⁴

67 On the widths of the band and the social division associated with them, see K. Olson, *Masculinity and Dress in Roman Antiquity* (Abingdon, 2017), 18–20. However, scholars have shown that the reality reflected in the literary sources is more complex; see B. Levick, “A Note on the Latus Clavus,” *Athenaeum* 79 (1991): 239–44, and L. Bender Jørgensen, “Clavi and Non-Clavi: Definitions of Various Bands on Roman Textiles,” in *Textiles y tintes en la ciudad antigua*, ed. C. Alfaro, J.-P. Brun, P. Borgard, and R. Pierobon Benoit (Valencia, 2011), 75–81.

68 The shape and size of the segmenta were probably related to social and class aspects; see R. MacMullen, “Some Pictures in Ammianus Marcellinus,” *ArtB* 46.4 (1964): 435–55, at 445–51 (reprinted in R. MacMullen, *Changes in the Roman Empire: Essays in the Ordinary* [Princeton, 1990], 78–106). On the origin of the orbiculi, see F. Pennick Morgan, *Dress and Personal Appearance in Late Antiquity: The Clothing of the Middle and Lower Classes* (Leiden, 2018), 39.

69 M. Harlow, “Clothes Maketh the Man: Power Dressing and Elite Masculinity in the Later Roman World,” in *Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300–900*, ed. L. Brubaker and J. M. H. Smith (Cambridge, 2004), 45–61, at 55–58.

70 M. P. Canepa, *The Two Eyes of the Earth: Art and Ritual of Kingship between Rome and Sasanian Iran* (Berkeley, 2009), 201–4.

71 H. Maguire, “Personal Adornment: Glory, Vainglory, and Insecurity,” in *Transition to Christianity: Art of Late Antiquity, 3rd–7th Century AD*, ed. A. Lazaridou and V. Mousseio (Athens, 2011), 43–47.

72 D. Janes, *God and Gold in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 1998), 119–33.

73 Zanker, *Socrates*, 268–79.

74 Urbano, “Literary,” 15–26.



Fig. 5. Lucius Pullius Peregrinus Sarcophagus, Palazzo Caffarelli-Clementino (formerly at the Museo Torlonia). Photo by Damien Marcellin Tournay; courtesy of Flickr (CC BY-NC 2.0).

For our purposes, it is particularly valuable to observe the columnar sarcophagi found in Roman art from the mid-second century, in which the different figures are positioned within arched niches separated by decorated columns.⁷⁵ This style was adopted during the Byzantine era by Christian art. For instance, the Ariosti-Fontana sarcophagus has seven shell-patterned arched niches (Fig. 6) with Jesus seated in the center niche holding an open book in one hand. His apostles stand in the remaining niches with their faces looking in various directions. Some of the apostles are facing Jesus, although the second figure on the left faces

leftward, similar to the leftmost figures in the middle register of the Huqoq mosaic.

In Huqoq, there appears to be a more pronounced disparity between the seated older figure and the standing youths. The senior figure clearly represents the values of learning and literacy, in contrast to the younger figures, who continue to hold swords and wear more conspicuously adorned clothing when compared to both their simple dress in the upper register and the older man's less decorated attire. Perhaps this complex composition is designed to portray the tension between the different values associated with the Hasmoneans. The ornately stylized clothing suited for royalty may perhaps indicate a change in the soldiers' status as new rulers, while the substitution of a scroll for the sword in the hands of the old man portrays him as a quintessential scholar. This implies perhaps that according to the Huqoq congregation (or the artists), the Hasmonean state was led and governed (or at the very least should have been led and governed)

75 E. Thomas, "‘Houses of the Dead’? Columnar Sarcophagi as ‘Micro-Architecture,’” in *Life, Death and Representation: Some New Work on Roman Sarcophagi*, ed. J. Elsner and J. Huskinson (Berlin, 2011), 387–435. There is disagreement as to whether the sarcophagus of Bishop Liberius, which today functions as the altar in the Church of St. Francis in Ravenna, indeed dates from the fourth century or whether it is a later forgery; see E. M. Schoolman, "Reassessing the Sarcophagi of Ravenna," *DOP* 67 (2013): 49–74, at 60–61.



Fig. 6. Ariosti-Fontana Sarcophagus, Ferrara, Church of San Francesco. Photo courtesy of the Istituzione Biblioteca Classense di Ravenna.

by Torah scholars, not by a class of soldiers that rose to greatness.

The different images of the Hasmoneans as kings, priests, or clergy also appear in rabbinic literature. Vered Noam has recently demonstrated that the Hasmoneans' status and iconography in rabbinic literature are not homogeneous.⁷⁶ The appreciation for the Hasmoneans' military valor is quite substantial in both *Megillat Ta'anit* and other rabbinic sources, but the Hasmonean commanders are not mentioned by name. In contrast, when the rabbis dealt with the image of John Hyrcanus, they set aside the military and political motifs highlighted by Josephus, instead referring to him as "Yohanan the high priest" and "an early sage who issues regulations."⁷⁷ Of course, these are insufficient grounds for the identification of the elderly man in the mosaic as John Hyrcanus, but as I will propose in the last section, the complex and multifaceted memory of the Hasmonean dynasty in rabbinic literature is echoed in a different way in Huqoq.

76 Noam, *Shifting Images*, 202–13.

77 Noam, *Shifting Images*, 206.

Hanukkah Menorah in Huqoq?

The final element to discuss regarding the middle register is the presence of nine lit oil lamps at the crown of each of the nine arches. To the best of my knowledge, this artistic motif is unknown from the art of this period, so it may have an iconographic meaning connected with the unique motifs of the midrash. I argue, with necessary caution, that the oil lamps are related to a particular motif in the midrash, while also representing its principal theme. I tend to agree with those who link the nine lamps to Hanukkah and the Hasmoneans.⁷⁸ The use of the motifs of light and oil lamps in a Jewish mosaic is not surprising, as the menorah is an exemplar of Jewish symbolism in late antiquity. Appearing in many variations in mosaic floors, stone

78 A. Ovadiah and R. Pierri, "The Mosaic Panel with the Warlike Scenes and Figurative Arcade in the Ancient Synagogue at Huqoq: Context and Meaning," *Judaica: Beiträge zum verstehen des Judentums* 73 (2017): 284–98, at 292; Balty, "Mosaïque," 511–12; and even Britt and Boustán (*Elephant*, 78, n. 233) hint at the affinity between the oil lamps and Hanukkah.

engravings, metal medallions, and reliefs, it is almost always depicted as the seven-branched menorah.⁷⁹ The nine oil lamps, as they appear in the Huqoq mosaic, certainly recall the nine-branched Hanukkah menorah while also suggesting something else. Although lighting candles for Hanukkah was a well-established tradition in late antiquity, it was only during the Middle Ages that special candelabra were designed for this purpose.⁸⁰ It seems that in ancient times regular oil lamps were aggregated in accordance with a particular day of the eight days.⁸¹ The nine oil lamps in the mosaic are explained by the religious laws of Hanukkah.

According to Rabbi Yohanan (a third-century Palestinian rabbi), one is forbidden to read, count, or perform any activity by the light of the Hanukkah candles (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 21b). Since the halakha determines that eight candles are to be lit during Hanukkah, a halakhic ordinance based on Rabbi Yohanan's words was introduced to prevent their forbidden use by directing the placement of a ninth candle adjacent to the sanctified lights, so that the Hanukkah lamps are never the only source of light in the house.⁸² Thus, on the last day of Hanukkah, there would be nine candles arranged in a single construct, as depicted in Huqoq.

However, considering the bull's horn midrash, the oil lamps in the mosaic are subject to deeper interpretation. The midrash in Genesis Rabbah begins with a

reference to the Greek empire, which "darkened the eyes of Israel with [its] decrees." The lamps appear at the dividing line between the upper and middle registers. Against the darkness depicted in the upper register, symbolizing the Greek kingdom and its decrees, the illuminating oil lamps in the mosaic are Hanukkah lamps, symbolizing religious victory.

To conclude, the middle register describes an additional stage in the struggle against "the Greeks." Following their victory, the soldiers' more elaborate clothing as opposed to their simple attire in the upper register indicates their having attained higher levels of authority and respect. The complex images of the Hasmoneans in late antiquity are evident in the differences between the seated figure and the standing younger men. The seated elder wearing relatively simple clothing and holding a scroll in his hand symbolizes not only an acceptance of but also the centrality of the Torah. The Hanukkah candles symbolize the commemoration of the Jewish spiritual and militaristic victory in the holiday of Hanukkah. The middle register illustrates that although the Hasmonean triumph involved military elements, it was primarily a victory of the Torah and its students.

Victory and Defeat in the Lower Register

The lower register stands in contrast to the middle register and completes the picture of the relationship between the Jews and the Hellenistic army following the conflict. It occupies approximately 17 percent of the panel, creating a distinct hierarchy, since the Jewish group in the middle register occupies twice the space as do the defeated Greeks in the register below. Visual signs of downfall are unmistakable: three javelins piercing a bull and battle gear strewn in disarray; war elephants lying lifeless on the ground; and dead soldiers with sprawled limbs and javelins wedged in their backs. Based on other examples from Byzantine art, in which the upper register depicts a leader and his unit and the lower depicts their inferior subjects, Britt and Boustán have noted that the compositions of these two registers are not unique. Indeed, they noted two examples—Theodosius's famous missorium and the Lampadii ivory diptych—that demonstrate this hierarchical relationship.⁸³ However, these artworks do not

79 Much has been written about the menorah and its significance. For our discussion, R. Hachlili's book *The Menorah, the Ancient Seven-Armed Candelabrum: Origin, Form, and Significance* (Leiden, 2001) is particularly important. In this monograph, Hachlili catalogues some 1,000 menorahs discovered in different contexts. The few with nine branches do not symbolize Hanukkah, but rather belong to a limited category of menorahs which have five, nine, or even more branches. Each of these anomalous menorahs results from negligent work by the artists and the differing numbers of branches has no halakhic or ritual significance (Hachlili, *Menorah*, 202).

80 S. L. Braunstein, *Five Centuries of Hanukkah Lamps from the Jewish Museum: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven, CT, 2005), 14–15, and B. Yaniv, "The Influence of Halakhah and Custom on the Design of Hanukkah Lamps," in D. Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael: Mekorot ve-Toldot*, vol. 5 (Jerusalem, 1995), 121–61. Mordechai Narkiss's study is still the most detailed research on the Hanukkah lamp (*The Hanukkah Lamp* [Jerusalem, 1939]).

81 Narkiss, *Hanukkah Lamp*, 1–2, and Yaniv, "The Influence," 122.

82 This halakha appears in the Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 21b. Given that the Palestinian Talmud, which was composed in the Land of Israel, mentions a similar prohibition (Palestinian Talmud, Shabbat 2:1, 4c), one assumes that the solution was the same—adding a ninth candle.

83 Britt and Boustán, *Elephant*, 40.



Fig. 7. Consular diptych, ivory, Western Roman Empire, 417, Saxony-Anhalt Cultural Foundation, Halberstadt cathedral treasure, inv. no. DS045. Photo by Falk Wenzel / the Kulturstiftung Sachsen-Anhalt Domschatz Halberstadt; courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

describe defeat and victory, but rather ruler and ruled. Comparable portrayals to the composition at Huqoq can be found in two other artistic objects from the first half of the fifth century: the Halberstadt diptych and the missorium of Aspar. The Halberstadt diptych has two leaves, each divided into three registers (Fig. 7). Each middle register depicts a consul with two figures, one on either side of him. On the right leaf, the consul is dressed in a *chlamys*, a royal garment, and holds a piece of cloth, or *mappa*, in his right hand, indicating his exclusive authority, while in his left, he holds the consular staff. The lower register depicts barbarian prisoners of war, whose hands are tied behind their

backs and whose battle gear is scattered on the ground in a definitive description of military triumph. Alan Cameron identifies the consul as Constance, who served between 412 and 414, claiming in his detailed analysis that the diptych most probably depicts a military victory over an Eastern army.⁸⁴ We find a similar composition on the missorium of Aspar. A silver plate depicts Roman consul Flavius Ardabur Aspar, who served in the year 434 (Fig. 8). At the center of the plate sits Aspar on a *sella curulis* with his young son at his

84 A. Cameron, "City Personifications and Consular Diptychs," *JRS* 105 (2015): 250–87.



Fig. 8. Misorium of Aspar, fifth century CE. Photo courtesy of the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze, Direzione regionale Musei della Toscana.

side. A female figure stands on each side, personifications representing Roman cities, probably Rome and Constantinople. The lower register contains symbols related to Aspar's authority and deeds. On the left are three palm branches symbolizing the consular games for which he was responsible, while on the other side three round shields suggest military triumph.⁸⁵ The resemblance to Huqoq is in the double structures in both registers, which is designed to express the authority and superiority of the figures in the middle register

by way of literally (visually) casting remnants of the defeated at the feet of the victor.

Old Questions, New Questions

Any new discovery of a Jewish work of art from late antiquity enriches and can even rejuvenate the discourse on the nature of the work and the cultural identity of the individuals associated with it. There is no doubt that the rich and unique findings from Huqoq will deepen the discourse, blaze new trails, and raise new questions.

The scholarly literature usually links two key issues regarding synagogues and synagogue art: (a) who controlled the ancient synagogue—were the norms

85 C. Zaccagnino, G. Bevan, and A. Gabov, "The *Misorium* of Ardabur Aspar: New Considerations on Its Archaeological and Historical Contexts," *ArchCl* 63 (2012): 419–54, at 421–30. For historical-artistic contexts, see Cameron, "City," 275–80.

and values of rabbinic authorities dominant in the synagogues of late antiquity, or were other religious concepts and social elites represented there, and (b) what sources of inspiration underlie synagogue art—do the themes and ideas appearing in works of Jewish art reflect only biblical stories, or might they echo rabbinic literature and/or other sources?⁸⁶ Steven Fine, tending to decipher Jewish art in relation to rabbinic literature, claims that the institutional functions of the synagogue, including its liturgical practices, patrons, and builders, were committed to rabbinic norms.⁸⁷ In contrast, Lee Levine contends that the rabbis constituted a marginal group with little influence and did not rule the local congregations, positing that there is no connecting line between rabbinic literature and works of art.⁸⁸ Uzi Leibner recently argued for many cases of distinct linkages between artistic representations and rabbinic literature, contending that although one cannot conclude that rabbis influenced or dominated the synagogues, there is indeed evidence of a shared cultural fabric.⁸⁹ According to Leibner, the primary issue is the very existence of these kinds of parallels rather than their direction of influence.⁹⁰

Where does the Huqoq mosaic fit in this framework, and how does it contribute to the ongoing discourse? Most of the studies that have dealt with the Elephant Mosaic panel have focused on iconographic decryption according to various sources. One group of scholars argues that, to date, all the mosaics and frescoes (other than Helios and zodiac) discovered in synagogues have presented only biblical scenes. Led by this argument, Ze'ev Weiss and Benjamin Gordon propose

that this scene describes Samuel's message to Saul at Gilgal, according to which God rejects Saul as king (1 Samuel 15).⁹¹ Reading the mosaic from the bottom up, Weiss and Gordon posit the lower register as depicting the defeat of the Amalekites and the middle showing Samuel and the sons of the prophets accompanying him, while the upper register depicts Samuel and his entourage facing Saul's men outfitted as Greek soldiers. Though this interpretation raises many difficulties, suffice to say that in the Book of Samuel, neither does Saul bring a bull to his meeting with the prophet nor is there a hint of Samuel's companions. Avraham Yosekovich argues for an alternative biblical interpretation, suggesting that the mosaic portrays the assassination of Eglon, king of Moab (Judges 3:12–30),⁹² by Ehud ben Gera. Indeed, in this biblical story there is no mention of youths, an army, or a bull, but Yosekovich shows that some details do appear in a rabbinic midrash and admits that many others, particularly the bull, do not.

Despite the logic in claiming that the mosaic presents a biblical story, no Bible-based story or midrash has yet been found that can convincingly explain the mosaic panel,⁹³ making it easily understandable why most scholars turn to post-biblical texts and contexts to explain it. The various interpretations by this group differ regarding the question of whether any ancient text (providing it offers a convincing interpretation) could be a source for the mosaic or whether these texts must have been plausibly available to or have shaped the cultural world of the Huqoq community.

Britt and Boustán, two members of Magness's research group, represent the first approach, claiming that it depicts the alliance between Antiochus VII Sidetes and the Hasmonean leader John Hyrcanus in 134 BCE.⁹⁴ Based primarily on Josephus's writing that Antiochus "sent in a magnificent sacrifice, oxen with their horns gilded" (Josephus, *Antiquities* 13:242), they read the panel upwards from the lowest register, in which the lowest depicts the military power of

86 The literature on the topic is extensive; see U. Leibner, "Rabbinic Traditions and Synagogue Art," in *Jewish Art in Its Late Antique Context*, ed. U. Leibner and C. Hezser (Tübingen, 2016), 139–54.

87 Fine, *Art*, 183.

88 L. I. Levine, "Synagogue Art and the Rabbis in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 2.1 (2011): 79–114, and L. I. Levine, *Visual Judaism in Late Antiquity: Historical Contexts of Jewish Art* (New Haven, CT, 2012), 403–42. Even when there are connections and similarities between rabbinical texts and the artistic representations, Levine rejects it; see, for example, *Visual Judaism*, 421.

89 Leibner, "Rabbinic Traditions," 151–52.

90 Boustán has made a similar suggestion; see R. Boustán, "Afterword: Rabbinization and the Persistence of Diversity in Jewish Culture in Late Antiquity," in *Diversity and Rabbinization: Jewish Texts and Societies between 400 and 1000 CE*, ed. G. McDowell, R. Naiweld, and D. Stökl Ben Ezra (Cambridge, 2021), 427–49, at 433–34.

91 Gordon and Weiss, "Samuel."

92 Yosekovich, "Elephant."

93 Steven Fine also argues for a biblical interpretation; see S. Fine, review of *The Elephant Mosaic Panel in the Synagogue at Huqoq: Official Publication and Initial Interpretations*, by Britt and Boustán, *Images: A Journal of Jewish Art and Visual Culture* 11.1 (2018): 259–61, at 261.

94 Britt and Boustán, *Elephant*, 79–80, and Boustán and Britt, "Historical Scenes," 347–50.

John Hyrcanus and the losses of Antiochus VII Sidetes during the siege of Jerusalem, while the upper follows Antiochus acknowledging his downfall and seeking an alliance with Hyrcanus.⁹⁵ Josephus, however, tells a very different story, and still more problematic is whether Galilean Jews knew this story at all.⁹⁶

Other scholars agree that the mosaic depicts a Hellenistic episode but were impressed by its warlike and conflicting nature. They searched the literary works of the period looking for the most suitable story. Rina Talgam proposes 3 Maccabees 1:1–2:24 as the textual background for the mosaic, claiming the panel is a rendering of the conflict between Ptolemy IV Philopator (222–204 BCE) and Simeon, the Jewish high priest.⁹⁷ Nina Braginskaya identifies the Greek leader as Antiochus Epiphanes and his opponent as Eleazar based on 1 Maccabees 6:28–47.⁹⁸ Asher Ovadiah, who

also suggested that the mosaic depicts scenes from the Maccabean Revolt, argues that the leader on the left is Mattathias Hasmonean facing the Seleucid commander who attempted to force him to offer a sacrifice to the Greek gods (1 Maccabees 2),⁹⁹ and Janine Balty identifies the Jewish figure as either Mattathias or Judah Maccabee and their opponent as Antiochus Epiphanes. Balty, however, prefers to view the mosaic as a schematic representation rather than a depiction of a particular historical scene.¹⁰⁰ Although the reasons for interpretations based on the Maccabean–Hellenistic conflict are easily understood, these suggestions are problematic. Despite the Jews' familiarity of the Hasmoneans and their wars in late antiquity, as well as the Jewish celebrations of their success, there is no evidence of a contemporaneous (i.e., late antique) Jewish source that indicates they were acquainted with the names of the Maccabean brothers. To the best of our knowledge, the Jews of the Land of Israel in late antiquity knew neither Josephus nor the Books of the Maccabees.¹⁰¹

It was this gap between the proposed sources and the date of the mosaic that led Adi Erlich to turn instead to rabbinic literature. Erlich suggests that the mosaic is a depiction of the friendship between Rabbi Judah the Patriarch and the Roman emperor, asserting the centrality of Rabbi Judah the Patriarch in the

95 Britt and Boustán, *Elephant*, 78–79.

96 Britt and Boustán are aware of this question. Their first publication (Britt and Boustán, *Elephant*, 75–76) claimed that Josephus's books were accessible to the societal elites who knew Greek or Latin. However, it should be noted that no Greek inscriptions have been found in the synagogue so far, and it is difficult to assess whether the people of Huqoq did indeed know Greek and whether books in Greek and Latin were accessible to any of them. In their second publication (Boustán and Britt, "Historical Scenes," 347–48), they proposed a different argument, according to which we have very little information about the ancient traditions that were known to the people of Huqoq. As evidence, they bring up the description of the prophet Jonah being swallowed up by three fish. According to them, the fact that this description is known only from later Jewish and Muslim traditions shows that in the Jewish Galilee of late antiquity, there were many traditions, of which only some found expression in midrashic literature. However, the example of Jonah may teach the opposite, that only a tradition that has gained literary expression has also received artistic expression. The fact that the tradition is in a late midrash does not, of course, indicate the time of its formation.

97 R. Talgam, "An Illustration of the Third Book of Maccabees in a Late-Antique Galilean Synagogue?," review of *The Elephant Mosaic Panel in the Synagogue at Huqoq: Official Publication and Initial Interpretations*, by Britt and Boustán, *JRA* 31 (2018): 518–23.

98 N. V. Braginskaya, "Novootkrytaya mozaika iz Khukkoka," in *Knigi Makkaveev: Perevod s Drevnegrecheskogo, vvedenie i kommentarii*, ed. N. V. Braginskaya, A. N. Koval, and A. I. Shmaina-Velikhanov (Jerusalem, 2014), 543–48. Later, when the entire panel was excavated, she published a more detailed paper: N. V. Braginskaya, "Proiskhozhdenie khanukkalnoy lampy v svete noveyshikh otkrytiy v Galilee," in *Obraz i simvol v iudeyskoy, khristianskoy i musulmanskoy traditsii*, ed. U. Gershovitch and A. B. Kovelman (Moscow, 2015), 41–62. For a review of Braginskaya's publications in English, see K. Bolonnikova, "JRA's Editorial Preface," in Britt and Boustán, *Elephant*, 11–15.

99 Ovadiah and Pierri, "Mosaic," 292–93.

100 Balty, "Mosaïque." Matthew Grey, who participated in the excavation, is also of the opinion that the mosaic depicts the Hasmoneans' victory over the Greeks, but he emphasizes the martyrdom traditions (Magneis et al., "Huqoq Excavation," 95). When this article was already approved for printing, another paper on the Elephant Mosaic panel was published: D. Cielontko, "The Elephant Mosaic Panel in the Huqoq Synagogue: A Reappraisal of the Maccabean Interpretation," in *Hellenism, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity: Transmission and Transformation of Ideas*, ed. R. Fialová, J. Hoblík, and P. Kitzler (Berlin, 2022), 179–204. Cielontko claims that the mosaic depicts the deeds of the martyrs described in 2 Maccabees, Eleazar the scribe (2 Maccabees 6:18–31), and the mother and her seven sons (2 Maccabees 7). This proposal is also problematic because we have no evidence that the Jews of the Land of Israel in late antiquity were familiar with 2 Maccabees (see below, n. 101). The story of the mother and her seven sons does appear in rabbinical literature, but not the story of Eleazar.

101 Jerome, the fourth-century church father, mentioned a Hebrew version of 1 Maccabees (R. Weber, ed., *Biblia sacra: Iuxta Vulgatam versionem*, part 1 [Stuttgart, 1983], 365), but he probably means that 1 Maccabees was written in Hebrew. See G. Darshan, "The Original Language of 1 Maccabees: A Reexamination," *Biblische Notizen* 182 (2019): 91–110, at 93–94.

collective memory of fifth-century Jewish Galilee, thus anchoring the mosaic in the sociocultural reality of its time. Yoskovich also highlights the importance of connecting the mosaic to sources and traditions that can be considered with certainty to have been present in the cultural world of the Huqoq community, suggesting that the mosaic presents a midrashic interpretation of the story of Ehud ben Gera.¹⁰² Finally, the site's excavator Jodi Magness suggests that the mosaic depicts an encounter between Alexander the Great and the high priest, found in both ancient (Josephus, *Antiquities* 11:302–47) and rabbinic sources.¹⁰³ However, as many scholars have already noted, many motifs in the mosaic are inconsistent with this narrative.¹⁰⁴

Each of these proposals has its own advantages and disadvantages,¹⁰⁵ but all assume the mosaic is a visual expression of some text. Scholars have argued that significant considerations in identifying the text underlying the mosaic are the definition of the community's cultural identity and the degree to which the text was likely to be familiar to community members. Erlich's and Yoskovich's assumption that the community was committed to rabbinic norms led to their conclusion that the mosaic depicts a rabbinic text. In contrast, for Britt and Boustán, to find support for their position they needed to argue for a significant Greco-Roman element in the cultural identity of the Huqoq community that enabled them to become acquainted with the story of Josephus. The current proposal is not without flaws. Nevertheless, one of its merits is that

it is not bound to the midrash or rabbinic attitude towards the Hasmoneans. The mosaic recognizes and uses motifs in rabbinic literature while organizing and interpreting them differently. I interpret the panel as a unique representation of the story of the Hasmoneans in dialogue with other, particularly rabbinic, concepts.

In rabbinic literature, the phrases “Hasmonean” and “Hasmonean house” appear only in the context of military confrontations with foreign forces, while the religious dimensions of the Hasmoneans merge into the figure of John the high priest. The rabbis attribute various religious regulations and even prophetic abilities to him. Scholars have striven to link “John the high priest” of the rabbis with “Hyrcanus,” the military and political leader. Although this identification is well supported, it must be emphasized that the rabbinic literature does not identify John the high priest as a descendant of the Hasmonean house, and a reader would have no way of doing so.

Indeed, the Hasmonean ethos as expressed by Hasmonean propaganda was committed on the one hand to the Torah and its commandments and to political and military skills on the other,¹⁰⁶ although rabbinic culture held no place for such unification.¹⁰⁷ Noam claims that the rabbis were reluctant to portray military figures as objects for admiration or imitation and therefore attributed the military successes to a collective body called “Hasmonean house.” On the other hand, due to his religious adherence, “John the high priest” was considered a worthy role model for future generations.¹⁰⁸

A fairly different approach emerges from the Hanukkah piyyutim describing the historical Hasmoneans. These chronicle the religious decrees and portray the Hasmoneans as military warriors loyal to the Torah. Although the piyyutim use motifs found in rabbinic

102 Erlich, “Patriarch”; Yoskovich, “Elephant,” 3, 18.

103 Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 69a; *Megillat Tāanit*, Kislev 21 (Noam, *Megilat Tāanit*, 100–103); Leviticus Rabbah 13:5 (Margulies, *Midrash Wayyikra Rabbah*, 1:296–94); and Pesiqta of Rab Kahana 4:9 (B. Mendelbaum, ed., *Pesiqta de Rav Kahana According to an Oxford Manuscript*, 2 vols. [New York, 1962], 1:75).

104 Magness did not publish a clear account of her interpretation of the mosaic. A comprehensive account of her ideas appears in Britt and Boustán, *Elephant*, 48–61. The highlights appeared in an announcement published on 2 July 2014 by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and were published in various reports. One of the earliest reports is an article that was published in *National Geographic* (A. R. Williams, “Explore This Mysterious Mosaic—It May Portray Alexander the Great,” *National Geographic*, 9 September 2016, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/mysterious-mosaic-alexander-the-great-israel>). Britt and Boustán, *Elephant*, 55–61, point out the problems with this proposal.

105 A detailed critical overview of the various proposals can be found in Erlich, “Patriarch,” 543–46, and Yoskovich, “Elephant,” 2–5.

106 E. Regev, *The Hasmoneans: Ideology, Archaeology, Identity* (Göttingen, 2013), 266–96.

107 In contrast to the Hasmoneans, biblical figures, chief among them King David, have been described by the rabbis as both “rabbis” and military leaders. For example, King David is called in the Talmud “Adino ha-Etzni” (2 Samuel 23:8). The Talmud explains: “[T]his alludes to the fact that when David would sit and occupy himself with Torah, he would make himself soft [*me’aden*] as a worm, and when he would go out to war, he would make himself hard and strong as a tree [*etz*]” (Babylonian Talmud, Mo’ed Qatan 16b:26).

108 Noam, *Shifting Images*, 221.

literature, they do not criticize the Hasmoneans,¹⁰⁹ a similar attitude characterizing the Elephant Mosaic panel. The plot depicted in the mosaic is based on the tradition of the Greek demand: “write upon the horn of a bull that you have no part in the God of Israel.” This tradition was interpreted differently in rabbinic literature than in the mosaic. The rabbis simply describe the religious conflict, but in Huqoq the Greek requirement is conflated in the story into a joint conflict with both military and religious aspects. To this end, the artist used the accepted artistic language of the period, dressing the Hellenistic group in military uniform, while the Jewish group was robed in tunics and pallia, like scholars and rabbis used to dress.

The innovative approach of the mosaic is more pronounced in its two lower parts. First, the two registers both emphasize the military nature of the conflict, which is not reflected in the midrash. Indeed, the rabbinic literature mentions victories of the Hasmoneans, but they are not connected to the religious conflict. Second, the

Hasmonean leadership as depicted in the middle register emphasizes, in the image of the elder holding the scroll, the commitment to Torah, while also recognizing the contribution of military power and leadership, portrayed by the images of eight youths with drawn swords and in garments signifying their political authority. The mosaic delineates the participation of rural community members of Huqoq alongside the rabbis in shaping the collective memory by using ancient traditions and depicting them in contemporary artistic language.

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109 O. Münz-Manor, “The Memory of the Hasmoneans in Piyyutim from Byzantine Palestine,” *Oqimta* 5 (2019): 101–24 at 118–20. The poem that describes the bull’s horn decree (see above, n. 28) later describes the military victory with the words “until the hand of Hashemites prevailed” (Fleischer, *Hebrew Poetry*, 175).

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and suggestions considerably improved the article. Nevertheless, “If indeed I have erred, my error remains with me” (Job 19:4).